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ABSTRACT

The descriptions of elementary age children representing 42 different social studies classrooms and the ways in which social studies is conducted in their classrooms are presented. In interviews children were asked to describe what happened on a day-to-day basis in their social studies classes; what they liked and disliked about social studies and why they liked or disliked it; what they would like to do more often and what they would like to do less; and anything else they would change. From the interviews eight distinct protocols for social studies instruction emerged: (1) "Teacher Reads"; (2) "Students Read"; (3) "Lecture/Discussion"; (4) "Correct, Read, Complete"; (5) "Packets"; (6) "Outlining"; (7) "Copy the Notes"; and (8) "Varied Activities." It was found that almost all of the protocols were primarily involved with the passing of factual information--usually, if not exclusively, from the social studies text. It is not surprising, therefore, that nearly half of the children interviewed said they disliked social studies and nearly a third said social studies was their least favorite subject. A 9-item list of references is included. (DB)

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Children's Descriptions of Social Studies

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November 1990

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The descriptions that comprise the bulk of this article come from interviews with over elementary age children, representing 42 different classrooms regarding their perceptions of social studies and the conduct of social studies in their classrooms. The interviews were conducted (by the author and several graduate students) with children in grades one through six during the summers of 1985, 1988 and 1990. During the interviews children were asked to describe what happened on a day-to-day basis in their social studies classes; what they liked and disliked about social studies and why they liked or disliked it; what they would like to do more often and what they would like to do less; and anything else they would change. They were also asked to describe the content they study, the uses they see for the content, and the types of questiions they are asked. Teachers were also asked to complete a short questionaire describing social studies instruction in their classrooms. This paper will focus primarily on the descriptions children provided of their social studies classes.

The interviews were then read and categorized based on the types of things the children described teachers and

students doing. From these data emerged eight distinct protocols[1] for social studies instruction. These descriptions are limited by the fact that the classrooms were not selected randomly; we worked with children we knew or in school buildings to which we already had access. The descriptions are also limited by the relatively small size of the sample. For the most part statistical data has been omitted as it would mean little in this context. Finally, we need to remember that these are descrptions through children's eyes; this is both their power and their limitation. Still, these descriptions provide a frighteningly familiar portrait of social studies instruction.

The eight protocols are described as follows:

Protocol One "Teacher Reads": In these classrooms a typical social studies lesson focuses on the teacher reading the text aloud.

Protocol Two "Students Read": A typical social studies lesson focus on students reading the text, either silently or aloud, followed by a period of time to work on the workbook or answer questions from the text.

Protocol Three "Lecture/Discussion": A typical social studies lesson consists of a lecture followed by teacher directed questioning about the content covered.

Protocol Four "Correct, Read, Complete": A typical social studies lesson consists of correcting the assignment

given the previous day, students reading the text silently followed by time to work on the assignment due the next day.

Protocol Five "Packets": In these classrooms social studies instruction consists of students completing packets of worksheets using the textbook as their primary source of information.

Protocol Six "Outlining": Social studies instruction in these classrooms focuses on students outlining chapters from their textbooks.

Protocol Seven "Copy the Notes": A typical social studies lesson consists of students copying the teacher's notes from the blackboard

Protocol Eight "Varied Activities": In these classrooms instruction varies to such a large degree that a typical day does not exist.

The standard textbook and worksheets and/or workbooks were used in social studies in all of the classrooms studied. All of the protocols also employ a variety of other methods from time to time. These include (but are not limited to) viewing movies or filmstrips, guest speakers, writing reports and going on field trips. In a number of classrooms teachers typically employing one protocol would occasionally use another protocol as well.

The findings concur with most other national studies and indicate that commercially produced social studies textbooks were the dominant instructional tool. These data do not support the contention that a teacher directed lesson

follwed by a recitation period are the most commonly used techniques (Shaver, Davis & Helburn, 1979). In over 60% of the classrooms represented social studies was characterized by the "Correct, Read, Complete" protocol (Protocol Four). This supports Stodolsky's (1988) contention that teachers often ignore both the "core" and "optional" teaching suggestions in the teacher's manuals, particularly activities which include more active approaches than are typically seen in these classrooms. One should not be surprised that nearly half of the children interviewed said they disliked social studies and nearly a third reported social studies to be their least favorite subject.

The protocols are similar in many respects. Almost all of them are primarily involved with the passing of factual information. For the most part the information came primarily, if not exclusively from the social studies text. There is no evidence that students had any choice in the material studied or the manner in which it happened. In general, the pattern of a time for passing information, either by the teachers or through the textbook followed by a set work period was evident in all of the classrooms studied. Similarly, all of the classrooms studied used workbooks or worksheets and a social studies textbook to some extent. This is consistent with most research on classroom practice (Shaver et al., 1980, Wiess, 1978, Wiley, 1977, Stake & Easley, 1977, Jarolimek, 1977). In most classrooms, students noted some work in small groups, some

discussion of feelings and beliefs, and some discussion of current events. The frequency of these activities is determined by the individual teacher and does not appear to coincide with any specific instructional protocol. These findings also coincide with most research on social studies instruction. In some cases the differences between the protocols are fairly subtle. I have retained them as seperate protocols in order to maintain a greater degree of flexibility in descriptions of classrooms and for later use in studying what children like and dislike about social studies. The term "protocol" implies more rigidity than these classrooms actually revealed. I have chosen this term specifically for this resonance. The degree to which these procedures are repeated on a day-to-day basis makes them seem to approach actual protocols.

Children's Descriptions of Social Studies Instruction

The eight descriptions which follow are archetypical descriptions of the range of instructional protocols represented by the classrooms studied. They are to be read separately as portraits of specific models of instruction and together as a composite description of how social studies is currently taught. The quotations in each description were included for two reasons. First, they were chosen to represent what appears to be common practice for each protocol of instruction. Second, their inclusion gives voice to the descriptions. These descriptions come from

students and teachers: I want them to retain their original personalities and shades of meaning.[1]

Protocol One: Teacher Reads

This instructional model represents only two of the forty-two classrooms studied. Students reported that on a typical day the teacher reads the text aloud and then asks questions on what was read. One of the teachers in these classrooms did not report reading aloud and answered the question "What would happen on a normal day?" as follows, "Reading and discussion, work on a worksheet." Students described a typical social studies lesson this way: "She will read out of the book to us and when she gets to something important she will tell us about it and then she will go on reading." Another student added, "Then she is done reading and asks us questions. She gives us worksheets and we do those. There is a day you have to hand in the worksheeets." The children report that most of the teacher's questions ask them to recall material from their textbook. One of the students noted though, that

[1]The quotations included here have been chosen to represent the kinds of statements made by children about different areas. In some cases some children may have reported the opposite opinion to that reported in the quotation as well. In all cases the quotes are presented verbatim. In cases where editing is indicated only material not germain to the topic being discussed has been eliminated.

the teacher asked, "Like if we agree or we think something is good."

The students reported that there really were not "special" or "different" days in social studies although the teacher reported using television occasionally.

Protocol Two: Kids Read

Protocol One and Protocol Two differ primarily in that, in the latter children read the text, either aloud or silently, rather than having it read to them. Thus their role in the classroom is somewhat less passive than the role of children in Protocol One classrooms.

One student described her Protocol Two social studies class this way: "He would give us our reading assignment and then he would give us a bunch of activities and we would do it...they just ask you questions about what you read and what you saw in the pictures. Sometimes we would discuss what we read."

A student in a classroom where the text is read aloud described her classroom saying,

> We usually take notes on what we read. We read a paragraph and then we talk about it and discuss it and if we have questions we will go over that and we take notes to help us on the test. We take turns reading out loud and then when we get to the end of the chapter we do the book things, the questions on it, we can use our notes for that, and usually have a map to do and then we are all done.

As both of the children quoted described, there is some discussion of the material in the text although it seems to consist mainly of the teacher asking recall questions about

the material just read. One student said, "We would talk it over and she would ask us what we read and what we learned about." Another recalled, "...if we were discussing the pilgrims or something he would ask maybe where they landed and what else they were called and why they went to America." A third student noted, "She doesn't ask us questions. Not much at least. The papers ask us about climate...or they
give us vocabulary words and they ask us things about special cities and stuff."

The way children in Protocol Two classrooms described what their teachers do during social studies class depended on whether the text was read aloud or silently. A child in a classroom where the text is read silently said "She'll read when she tells us to read. Then she'll talk it over with us. Maybe she'll make up a worksheet or something like that."

In classrooms where the text is read orally the teacher clearly takes a more active role. In one of these classrooms the teacher "...reads with us and watches to see if the kids are paying attention...asks us questions." Children in all Protocol Two classrooms reported that their teacher "helped us along," answered or asked questions, or worked at his/her desk. For the most part, teachers described what they do in approximately the same way as their students, however, none of the teachers mentioned working at their desks.

Protocol Three: Lecture/Discussion

In Protocol Three classrooms the teacher is clearly the main actor although children do take a more active role than in some of the other models. Here, the teacher interprets the material in the text for students in a lecture format. Children in Protocol Three classrooms characterize what happens as the teacher "talking about social studies." A "discussion period" consisting mostly of recall questions based on the text or "lecture" follows. Most research on discussion would call this activity recitation (Gall & Gall, 1976; Dillon, 1984; Stodolsky et al., 1981).

A particularly verbal student described her Protocol Three classroom this way:

> She gives us a preview of what we are going to be doing in class and we start talking about it--the minor points at the beginning--and then we really get into it. We always have paper and pencil so we can take notes because we always get a lot of notes and then basically at the end she sort of ties it up and then starts again the next day.... We have questions at the end of each part we read...and then we have a social studies workbook where we get about two pages every other week or every week.

Not all of the Protocol Three classrooms are as strongly geared toward note taking as the one just described. A student from another classroom said, "Well we usually talk about way back in history as the 1850's....We read and talk and somehow we get into weird conversations..." A third student, when asked to describe his social studies class, said, "We don't do much. The teacher talks for a long time about the Civil War...about

quarter after we start reading our books...she has a girl that can read pretty fast....then she asks questions." As the quotations demonstrate, instruction in Protocol Three classrooms is not all lecture and discussion. Students report using the textbook often (if not everyday) and sometimes having workbook pages to do as well. As in most classrooms, students occasionally are assigned library research projects. Students in Protocol Three classrooms describe their teachers as "talking about stuff" or "talking with us" during the lecture/ discussion period and "doing something at her desk" or "doing his work" as well as answering questions when students are working on assignments. Teachers' descriptions of their social studies classes were very similar to those of the students. One teacher wrote, "Due to the fact that the readability of the text is above most students in my class, I paraphrase the lesson." Notably, two of the Protocol Three teachers mentioned social studies and history as subjects in which they were particularly interested. Most social studies research on classroom practice cites lecture/discussion as the most common method of social studies instruction at all levels (Shaver et al., 1980; Wiley, 1977; Weiss, 1978). However, this particular model represents only four of the eighteen classrooms studied.

Protocol Four: Correct, Read, Complete

Very little direct teaching of social studies occurs in Protocol Four classrooms. On most days, students correct

the previous day's work, report their grades to the teacher, discuss the next assignment, silently read the assigned portions of the textbook, and then begin working on the assignment due the next day. The teacher conducts class and assigns work, but the content and activities come from the text or the workbook. Students described their social studies class somewhat like this:

> We usually get out our assignments and we correct our assignments first. And then she will talk over the assignment that is going to be due Wednesday. First she will tell us our assignments and then she kind of explains how to do it. Then she usually tells us just to go to work, and then we will start to work.

Another student added, "Sometimes we will talk a little about our score. We have the social studies workbook, sometimes we get pages in that. Then we have a hard (cover) book and there is questions at the end of the chapter. We read those and answer them." Students reported playing games or doing library research projects on special days in Protocol Four classrooms. Students in these classrooms do not perceive their teachers to be particularly involved with teaching social studies. A typical answer to the question "What does your teacher do during these times?" was "She makes sure that everybody is working on their assignments and she gives us a lot of work and she asks for any questions. A lot of times she goes in the teachers' lounge." Teachers' descriptions also support this model answering the question "What would happen on a normal day?" somewhat like this: "Correct assignments, record scores,

discuss reading assignment, introduce new assignments, show filmstrip-film or activity."

When there is discussion, children report that most of the questions are recall questions based on the material in the text. Again, this is probably more accurately called recitation than discussion.

Protocol Five: Packets

The main social studies activity in Protocol Five classrooms is completing worksheets. Usually a number of worksheets are assigned at one time. Students call them "units" or "packets." Packets contain, with some variations from class to class, vocabulary activities, questions to be answered and maps to be filled in. The textbook is sometimes read silently in class, and there is occasional discussion of the worksheeets. In some of the classrooms, library research reports are a part of the packets, in others they constitute separate assignments.

Students describe Protocol Five classrooms this way: "He gives us units to do, there are questions, reports, maps. We will read a couple pages in the book. Then we will take time to work on our unit." Another student described what she did with her "unit:"

> There are about twenty-five of them (worksheets), about three maps and we have to do the worksheets which are questions about the books and countries and maps. We have four social studies books. Sometimes it tells you to use your Mexico book and sometimes one of the other books, but other times it is easier to find them in the book they don't tell you to use. (I: why?) They want you to have to look harder.

Only one of the Protocol Five teachers responded to the questionnaire. Although he did mention units as a part of his classroom routine, they were not as important as textbook reading and a "guided lesson...usually based on a country." He also described interpreting the text for students. The students in this classroom described some of these activities but their emphases were on completing "units." Protocol Five classroom students described their teachers as doing their own work or monitoring students when they are not conducting class or making assignments. One said, "(he) just kind of sits there and watches everybody, makes sure they don't talk." Another, more verbal student said,

> If he is just telling us about something he will sit up behind his podium and look around to see who is talking and not doing what they are supposed to be doing. But if he has assigned something and he is just watching the class he will put grades into the computer. He'll do that sometimes and every once in a while he will look up and around to see who is talking.

There seems to be little discussion in Protocol Five classrooms. When there is, it usually focuses on recall of factual information. Students described questions like "Where was Abe Lincoln born." Another noted, "He will most likely just ask about what our subjects are unless it is one of his army stories." One student's immediate answer to a request for an example of the kind of question her tacher would ask in the social studies was, "Were you talking?"

Protocol Six: Outlining

On a normal day, students in Protocol Six classrooms spend most of their social studies period outlining sections of the textbook. One of the students interviewed described her social studies class this way:

> We usually have to take out our social studies books and open to a certain page. And then talk a little bit and then outline the unit.
> I: Do you read to yourself or outloud?
> It's kind of both. We read mostly by ourselves. It's really important to read outloud.

Another student added, "He wants to outline because when we are in seventh grade next year we will have to outline a lot."

Because this instructional model represents only one of the forty-two classrooms studied it is impossible to make many other generalizations about it.

Children in this particular classroom saw their day-to-day social studies instruction much differently than their teacher described it. The teacher wrote:

> My approach varies. We may do one or a combination of the following: A. Read orally and discuss. B. Assign to read certain pages and take notes. C. Assign to read and discuss the following or I assign to read in preparation for a quiz.

Both students and teacher described having guest speakers, watching films, and a variety of other activities happening on a regular basis.

In this particular classroom, the students report that at least some of the questions require students to do more than recall information. One student recalled, "we had to

think about what they would do, stuff that we do that compares with them." Another student added, "Yea, he says, 'Do you think the government is run right?' and you say yes."

Protocol Seven: Copy the Notes

The day-to-day instruction in this model seems to be the most consistent among the classrooms studied. The teacher interprets the material and writes notes on the blackboard for students to copy. A student described his class this way:

> We take all of our books and notebooks and then the teacher writes notes on the board and we write them down so we get a better grade on our test...sometimes we get three-page worksheets like today and we work on that and if we don't get it done we take it home.

According to students, the only break in this routine is an occasional library/research assignment.

Students perceive their teacher to be involved with his/her own work after lecturing and assigning work. One student described what his teacher does in social studies this way: "He writes on the board then grades papers after he gets done." One of teachers confirmed this by noting that in an average lesson he would "use notes and lecture/work on worksheets/study guides" while students "take notes or work on worksheets."

Protocol Eight: Varied Activities

This instructional model was the most difficult to identify from children's descriptions. Their initial classroom descriptions were much like those in other

classrooms. However, they seemed to lack the depth that comes from consistent practice. A typical exchange between a student in the Protocol Eight classroom and myself about what happens during social studies class went like this:

I: Can you tell me what happens during your social studies class? On a regular day what happens?
C: Well, we read.
I: Anything else?
C: We watch filmstrips.
I: Anything else?
C: We talk a lot.

It is only through further probing that the variety of practice in this classroom appears. Watching movies or filmstrips, field trips, research projects, working with the computer, hands-on activities such as making models or dioramas, and reading and discussing the textbook are all regular parts of social studies instruction in this classroom. It is probable that discussion, reading of the textbook and watching filmstrips are more common than the other activities listed. As exemplified by the preceding quote, children didn't volunteer much description of a typical day. I suspect that activities are so varied that a typical day doesn't exist.

Unlike all other classrooms in this sample, social studies does not appear to consist of a lecture/ discussion or reading/discussion period followed by a set work period. Instead when asked what their teacher does during social studies students replied, "She watches the filmstrip and then she has a discussion on the filmstrip to make sure we were watching." Another student replied, "She just asks

questions." Still, based on students' descriptions, the questions appear to be mostly at the recall level.

The Protocol Eight classroom teacher's descriptions confirmed the children's observations. A normal day was described this way, "We use texts/filmstrips/TV programs and have discussion, we have a lot of them (special days)... Chinese New Year we eat, St. Davids Day we eat...field trips (naturalization ceremonies, visit with congressman-when in town.)" The teacher also noted that having a specific daily routine would be boring.

Summary

The portrait of social studies created by these descriptions is not pretty. Curriculum and instruction seem to be focused solely on the transfer of information. Most (if not all) of the larger goals upon which social studies are predicated, (ie decision making, citizenship) are missing entirely. Most of the other initiatives within social studies, such as the social sciences, current events, global or multi-cultural awareness, and inquiry of any sort are also absent from these descriptions.

It is not surprising that more than half of the children interviewed dislike social studies. From the bases of their description there really isn't very much here to like. From children's vantage point these classrooms are about information transfer; if we indeed have larger goals they certainly are not being communicated to these children.

If as educators we wish to achieve more than rote memorization of information we must clearly elucidate our goals to children, to parents and to other educators, and we must develop viable strategies for helping teachers and students reach these goals.

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